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ABSTRACT

Retention, the practice of requiring a student to repeat a particular grade or of delaying the entry to kindergarden or first grade of a child who is of appropriate chronological age, remains a common educational custom although little research exists to validate its effectiveness. The literature review on retention effects contained within this document concludes that retention shows no clear benefits for students in terms of academic gains, personal and/or social growth, or attitude improvement toward school; furthermore, the review indicates that the policy of retention has increasingly been criticized for having negative effects in all these areas, and it has recently become associated with an increased risk of dropping out of school. While it may be that retention helps some small percentage of students, our ability to predict exactly which students will benefit is exceedingly limited. Given this lack of convincing evidence supporting the use of retention, this document suggests that it is imperative that school psychologists and educators give careful consideration to other options and alternatives that will better meet the needs of low-achieving students. (36 references) (KM)

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# SUPPORTING PAPER ON RETENTION POSITION STATEMENT

FOR

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Supporting Paper on Retention Position Statement

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NASP Children's Services Committee

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Retention or nonpromotion has been defined as the practice of requiring a child to repeat a particular grade or requiring a child of appropriate chronological age to delay entry to kindergarten or first grade. The use of retention has been associated with the introduction of graded schools in the 19th century as a response to the problem of students who seemed ill prepared for the next grade. Germain and Merlo (1985) note that concern about the possible negative effects of retention on students was first expressed in the 1930's although the practice continues to be widespread.

Retention remains a common educational practice (Bocks, 1977) although little research exists to validate is effectiveness (Chafe, 1984; Chandler, 1984; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jackson, 1975; Lindvig, 1983; Medway & Rose, 1986; Nikalson, 1984; Rose, Medway, Cantrell, & Marus, 1983). Until recently, most reviewers agreed that the research indicated that retention outcomes were more likely to be positive the earlier in a child's educational history the retention occurred. However, negative effects of non-promotion even on young retainees has caused some experts to warn against the practice at any age (Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Smith & Shepard, in press).

As with many areas of common educational policy and practice, the research on the effects of retention is extensive. However, reviews of that literature have concluded that the research is flawed and of poor quality

(Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jackson, 1975; Medway & Rose, 1986). While the use of an experimental design in which comparable groups of students are retained or promoted according to random assignment might be the best way to investigate retention effects, political and ethical considerations prevent the use of such a design (McAfee, 1981). However, others have pointed out that proponents of experimental designs ignore the difference between basic and applied educational research (Pomplun, 1988). Pomplun maintains that problems with non-experimental research can be corrected, as in the use of nonequivalent group design of untreated control groups with pretest and posttest. In addition, the use of meta-analysis allows data to be pooled from a large number of studies effect size to be used as a means of statistically summarizing findings (Holmes & Matthews, 1984). Other, more elaborate techniques such as causal modeling (Smith & Shepard, in press) have also been employed. As a result of these techniques, most recent reviewers of the literature on retention effects have concluded that retention shows no clear benefits for students in terms of academic gains, personal-social growth, or improvement in attitudes towards school. Furthermore, the policy of retention has increasingly been criticized for having negative effects in all these areas, and has become associated with increasing risk of dropping out of school. A brief review of the literature follows.

## Retention and Academic Achievement

Holmes & Matthews (1984) conducted a meta-analysis on 44 studies, calculating 575 effect sizes to determine the effects of retention on a variety of factors, such as achievement, personal adjustment, self-concept, etc. The studies they selected investigated the effects of retention in elementary and junior high age students and contained sufficient data to estimate an effect size. All studies selected compared a group of retained

students with a group of promoted students.

Thirty-one of the studies reviewed by Holmes and Matthews investigated achievement affects. These studies yielded an overall effect size of -.44, indicating that retained students scored, on average .44 standard deviation units lower than promoted students on measures of academic achievement ($p<.001$). When effect sizes were calculated for specific content areas, they continued to be negative and statistically significant. These effect sizes translate into a loss in grade equivalent units ranging from a few months to half a year. When Holmes and Matthews analyzed the data by grade level in which retention took place (grades 1-6) they again found negative effects at all grade levels. This raises some doubts about the commonly held belief that the earlier a student is retained the greater the likelihood that retention will produce positive effects.

Another challenge to this belief--that early retention produces achievement gains while later retention does not--are longitudinal studies which suggest that whatever gains are made initially due to retention, the effects are washed out over time. Raygor (1972) found that while children placed in "transition" classrooms between kindergarten and first grade showed initial advantages in reading, these differences were not sustained in third and fourth grade. May and Welch (1985) compared the achievement of two groups of students whose scores on the Gesell Developmental Test suggested they needed an extra year before first grade. On third grade achievement tests, the authors found no differences between the group who were placed by their parents in transition classes and the group whose parents chose to send directly to first grade.

Many perceive transition classes for children "not ready for first grade" as preferable to retention. However, these programs appear to be no

more effective than retention (Matthews, 1977; Talmadge, 1981). Zinski (1983) found no significant differences at the end of the first grade between children attending a transitional program between kindergarten and first grade and children who repeated first grade. Credler (1984) reviewed seven studies investigating the effects of transition room placement and concluded that "Research indicates that transition room children either do not perform as well or are at most equal in achievement levels to transition room-eligible children placed in regular classrooms."

Another argument has been made for retaining children with late birthdates on the assumption that they are at-risk for school failure due to social-emotional immaturity. While late-birthdate children who are retained or held out of school for a year may do better initially than those enrolled in first grade at the prescribed age, longitudinal studies show that initial achievement gains do not hold up over time. For instance, Miller and Norris (1967) found significant differences between early, middle, and late first graders on three of six readiness measures. At the end of four years, however, the average achievement of the early group did not differ significantly from the average achievement of the middle group.

Not only does retention fail to solve the problems it is intended to solve, the use of retention may prevent schools from implementing more effective interventions. For instance, in a study by Leinhardt (1980) low achieving students were chosen by the school psychologist to participate in a "transition" year between kindergarten and first grade. Similar groups of students were assigned to one of two first grade classrooms. In one class, the group used an individualized reading program, while a basal reading series was used in the second class The author concluded that the low achieving students assigned to the first grade class with the individualized reading program made significantly greater gains in reading achievement than

those students assigned to the transition rooms. There were no differences between transition students and students placed in the basal reading system.

## Retention and Personal Adjustment

Proponents of retention maintain that promoting children when they are not ready can have a harmful effect on personal adjustment and self-concept. As with the achievement data, however, the bulk of the research does not support this contention.

In addition to looking at achievement effects, Holmes & Matthews (1984) calculated effect sizes on measures of personal adjustment. Computing 142 effect sizes on personal adjustment measures taken from 21 studies, they found an average effect size of -.27. Looking at three sub-areas of social adjustment, emotional adjustment, and behavior, effect sizes ranged from -.27 to -.37, and all were statistically significant. Holmes and Matthews also computed effect sizes for self-concept measures. While the average effect size was smaller (-.19), it was nonetheless statistically significant.

Many studies have documented that students' attitudes toward retention are negative. Byrnes and Yamamoto (1984) found that children who are retained recognize the change as failure and feel ashamed. In their study children rated retention behind only blindness and parental death as most stressful experiences. Smith and Shepard (in press) reported that clinical interviews with retained students indicate that these students saw their retention as "flunking" and as punishment. They experienced anger or sadness and feared the reaction of parents and classmates. In this same study, parents of retained kindergartners reported that their children experienced teasing and adjustment problems because of their nonpromotion.

Johnson (1981) argued that children who have failed in school show characteristics of learned helplessness. Students in his study were likely to attribute failure to themselves but to deny responsibility for their success.

Sandoval and Fitzgerald (1985) studied the attitudes toward retention or participation in a junior first grade in high school students with somewhat different results. Three study groups included those students who had been retained in a grade, those who had attended a junior first grade program, and those who had neither been retained nor placed in a junior first grade. All three groups demonstrated positive attitudes about retention and the junior first program. This finding conflicts with other studies of student attitudes. It would be interesting to know if a portion of the affected groups were not interviewed because they had already dropped out of school. It is also not clear whether the positive attitudes were long-held beliefs or whether, when younger, students had not felt as positive about the experience of retention or delaying entry to first grade. The authors also suggest that while positive attitudes may have been because students genuinely perceived the programs as helpful, alternative explanations are that the opinions expressed were the result of "dissonance reduction" or an attempt to give socially desireable responses.

## Retention and School Dropout

Student dropout rates have become a focus of national concern, and educators are increasingly recognizing that large segments of the school population are, for one reason or another, at risk for dropping out. Grissom and Shepard (in press) point out that two competing hypotheses may explain the relationship between dropping out and grade retention: repeating a grade may increase the risk of dropping out or poor achievement

may account for both retention and dropping out. The authors provide an extensive analysis of several studies with which they attempt to demonstrate that the act of grade retention by itself increases the likelihood that students will subsequently drop out of school. For instance, they cite a series of studies conducted in the Chicago public schools which attempted to adjust for student achievement levels before looking at the effect of retention on dropping out. One study (Schulz, Toles, Rice, Grauer, & Harvey, 1986) found that the dropout rate of overage students (students who have been retained) was 13 percent higher than the dropout rate of normal-age students with equivalent reading achievement scores.

Grissom and Shepard also used causal modelling techniques to study the effects of retention on dropping out in several large school systems. The authors found that even when students' background, sex and achievement are controlled, a significant effect for grade retention on dropping out remains. They note that, while the magnitude of the effect varies from one school system to the next, retention has a significant impact on even the most advantaged group, those least likely to leave school. They conclude that the consistency of findings across many analyses supports the conclusion that retention adds to the risk of dropping out.

Currently, at least 29 states require high school students to pass some type of competency-based or standardized achievement test in order to graduate (Howe & Edelman, 1985). Higher standards and passing competency based tests as a condition for graduation will most likely result in an increase in the number of students retained and dropping out of high school (Hamilton, 1986). Retention is unlikely to motivate students to achieve the standards enacted by school districts, and once students experience failure they come to view themselves as failures (Thompson, 1980). These unintended negative side effects must also be considered when retention is promoted as

a viable solution to the problem of poor school achievement.

## Can the "Successful Retainee" Be Predicted?

Many factors, such as visual-motor skill, physical size, and scores on standardized or informal tests of readiness are used as guideposts by parents, teachers, and administrators when making retention decisions at the kindergarten and first grade level. Sandoval and Hughes (1981) found that visual-motor skills, physical size, and other child factors were not good predictors of positive retention outcomes.

Sandoval and Hughes (1981) also found that children who made academic and social-emotional gains after repeating first grade lacked serious academic deficits in the year prior to retention, had strong self-esteem and social skills, and showed signs of difficulty in school because of lack of exposure to material (because of high absenteeism, or frequent family moves) rather than low ability. In a five year follow-up, Sandoval (1987) found that these same factors predicted success in the upper grades. However, Smith and Shepard (in press) make two points about this study: 1) since relatively high achievement and high self-concept prior to retention correlated with positive outcomes this may imply that "the most successful retainees are those who need the treatment the least," and 2) "the most damning finding from this study...was that even the most successful retainees were no better than promoted controls on a variety of outcome measures taken at the end of first grade."

Although only one state, Georgia, currently mandates standardized testing at the kindergarten level, a commonly reported factor in retention decisions at the elementary level is standardized test results (especially in reading and math). The use of standardized tests at the kindergarten or

first grade level to determine school entry or promotion is often inappropriate, as these tests are typically designed to be used as screening tests. These practices disproportionately affect minority and low-income children and disregard the negative impact of retention on self-esteem and academics (Gredler, 1984; Shepard & Smith, 1986; Smith & Shepard, 1987).

Some researchers have felt that it is possible to predict which students will benefit from retention and have encouraged schools to develop decision-making procedures to aid in selecting likely candidates for successful retention (Lieberman, 1980; Light, 1977). Others have rejected such a process. Smith and Shepard (1987) conclude from their own research and their review of the literature, "Although some small percentage of those retained may be helped, the evidence indicates that educators are simply unable to predict accurately which individuals these will be."

## Conclusions and Recommendations

A review of the research on the effectiveness of retention of students shows disparity between best practice and actual practice. Despite the widespread use of retention, few state consultants who replied to a NASP survey (Rafoth & Carey, 1988) reported that any systematic data collection is conducted at a state level regarding number of children retained and follow-up. While serious doubts remain about the effectiveness of retention, there is little indication that many state education agencies are actively trying to assess the magnitude or consequences of non-promotion.

While research on the effectiveness of retention has been criticized for its poor quality, most recent reviewers have concluded that the cumulative body of research has found that retention can negatively affect achievement, social-emotional adjustment, and attitudes toward school. In

addition, retention has been linked to later dropping out of school even when controlling for student background and achievement level. While it may be that retention benefits some small percentage of students, our ability to predict exactly which students may benefit is exceedingly limited.

Furthermore, more positive alternatives to retention may exist that will have a far greater likelihood of success. Given the lack of convincing evidence supporting the use of retention, it is imperative that school psychologists and educators give careful consideration to other options and alternatives that will better meet the needs of low achieving students. Alternative instructional strategies such as cooperative learning, mastery learning, direct instruction, adaptive education, individualized instruction, peer tutoring, and curriculum-based assessment have all been shown to result in achievement and/or self-concept gains for low achievers. Alternative programming such as after-school tutoring, remedial reading or math classes, and summer school programs may all be ways to increase time-on-task, a crucial variable in enhancing academic achievement.

NASP encourages school psychologists to become involved in making retention decisions in their local schools. They can do this by helping to evaluate the reasons for school failure, helping to plan appropriate instructional programs for the following year whether or not the child is retained, and by acting as consultants to parents to help them make retention decisions. In addition, NASP encourages school psychologists to collect data at the local level that will help delineate the long-term effects of retention policies and to share this data with policy-makers. Finally, NASP urges school psychologists to become familiar with the data base on the effects of retention and to share this knowledge with educators both at local and state levels in order to promote alternatives to retention.

The research reviewed in this supporting document reveals that retention is a costly and largely ineffective way to deal with academic failure. Alternative solutions are demanded if quality education is to be delivered. Neither social promotion nor retention is the answer to pressing needs in the schools. Complex problems merit creative and innovative solutions; retention has all too often been a simple response to such a complex problem in the past. Our children demand alternatives which address their needs effectively and do not penalize them for academic failure.

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